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Reagan Says Freedom Medal Goes to Whittaker Chambers

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 21 — President Reagan today announced the posthumous award of the Medal of Freedom, the Government's highest civilian award, to Whittaker Chambers, the professed Soviet agent who became a celebrated anti-Communist 35 years ago.

Mr. Reagan has regularly praised Mr. Chambers over the years as a patriot, and he was cited "for his contribution in the field of public service" in being included on a list of 14 recipients of the medal to be honored at a White House luncheon on March 26.

Mr. Chambers, who died July 9, 1961, confronted Alger Hiss, a former State Department official, before a Congressional hearing in 1948 and testified that they both were involved in espionage for the Soviet Union. Mr. Hiss eventually went to prison, and Mr. Chambers became a hero of the conservative movement and an anti-Communist writer.

Mr. Reagan paid tribute to Mr. Chambers, who was a Time magazine editor, in speaking at Eureka College in Illinois on Feb. 6 and inaugurating a Time promotional campaign of speeches by cover personalities.

"Chambers's story represents a generation's disenchantment with statism and its return to eternal truths and fundamental values," Mr. Reagan declared then, in hailing what he called a current "counter-revolution of the intellectuals" that was "predated by one of the most vivid events of my time."

"He was not believed at first," the President said of Mr. Chamber's testimony. "But the inexorable power of the truth was slowly felt and overwhelming evidence led a jury to convict one of those former officials of perjury."

In his autobiography, "Where's the Rest of Me?" Mr. Reagan had cited "the tragic and lonely Whittaker Chambers" as an inspiration. He has often referred to Mr. Chambers's account of turning from communism and finding a belief in God the day he pondered the intricacies of nature represented by "the sight of his infant daughter's ear."

In response to a question, the White House said a number of letters of recommendation had been submitted in Mr. Chambers's behalf, including some from conservative groups, just as various other organizations had proposed recipients in their fields of interest.

The other medal recipients announced by the White House included two other posthumous citations, for Jackie Robinson, the black athlete who integrated professional baseball, for sportsmanship, and for President Anwar el-Sadat of Egypt.

The other recipients announced were Howard H. Baker Jr., Senate majority leader, for government service; James Cagney, the actor, for contributions to entertainment; Leo Cherne, the economist, who was chairman of the International Rescue Committee, for humanitarianism; Dr. Denton Cooley, the surgeon, for the field of medicine, Tennessee Ernie Ford, the singer, for entertainment; Dr. Hector Garcia, for humanitarianism; Gen. Andrew Goodpaster, for international affairs; Lincoln Kirstein, co-founder and general director of the New York City Ballet, for dance and the arts; Louis L'Amour, a writer, for literature; the Rev. Norman Vincent Peale, for theology, and Eunice Kennedy Shriver, for aiding the mentally retarded.